

Sandy Summers, Nurs '02 (MSN/MPH) Nursing Advocate Fights Damaging Media Stereotypes

Like an airline passenger in an emergency, the nursing profession needs to put on its own oxygen mask before it can help patients, says Sandy Summers. And as the executive director of the Center for Nursing Advocacy, she's doing what she can to help nurses empower their profession.

As Summers sees it, nursing suffers from a persistent image problem perpetuated by the media through rampant and damaging stereotypes. Among them: the handmaiden, angel, sex object, and battle-axe.

In 2001, while still in graduate school at Johns Hopkins, Summers partnered with six fellow classmates to battle damaging stereotypes through a nursing advocacy group. Since then, through its Web site, www.nursingadvocacy.org, the group has grown into a worldwide, grassroots network of colleagues who collectively research media portrayals of nursing, work to educate the public, and organize media campaigns to correct portrayals that exploit, distort, or misinform, and to encourage better ones. The group also fights an uphill battle to get the media to use nurses as expert sources for health care stories, and it supports increased funding for nursing through education and awareness.

The center has had particular success battling the "naughty nurse" stereotype. When a 2004 Skechers shoes ad featured Christina Aguilera as an S&M-style nurse with a garter belt, boots, and cleavage, the group organized a letter-writing protest that drew 3,000 letters and eventually brought the campaign to a halt.

They also induced TV talk show host "Dr. Phil" to issue a televised statement assuring nurses he respected them. This followed a comment he'd made on the show: "I've seen lots of cute little nurses go after doctors, because they're going to seduce and marry them a doctor, because that's their ticket out of having to work as a nurse." Summers and company elicited 1,300 letters of protest in five days. The chagrined "Dr. Phil" also promised to devote an entire show to the issue of the nursing profession and its image problem in the media.

But the center also has had its share of frus-



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trations. Along with 20 million other viewers in the United States, Summers tunes in to the long-running television series *ER* almost every Thursday night. She rarely likes what she sees: an "insidious portrayal of nurses as wallpaper or handmaidens." Summers notes that *ER* tends to define nurses by their romantic relationships to physicians and frequently depicts physicians doing key tasks actually performed by nurses.

"Why doesn't the media show nurses who can identify a lethal cardiac rhythm and use defibrillation to bring someone back from the brink of death?" she asks. "On television, physicians are always the heroes, but in real life, nurses often do that heroic work."

Many weeks, after viewing *ER*, the center swings into action and posts an analysis of the show on the organization's Web site. They have worked for three years to get *ER* to consult nursing advisers for accuracy in its scripts—in addition to the show's current all-physician advisory staff—with no success.

Summers' primary concern is that erroneous media stereotypes exacerbate the nursing shortage, which first emerged in 1998 and now threatens to seriously undermine health care, both in the U.S. and globally. Her convictions are backed up by research showing that

ER greatly influences public perceptions of nursing, including grade and high school students. "Public health is at stake," Summers says. "Nurses don't just change bedpans, hold

hands, and gossip about physicians. We save and improve lives. We provide critical care for millions. We advocate for and protect patients. People die when there aren't enough nurses and when nursing is undermined by health care money managers."

By raising awareness, Summers also hopes to increase funding for the nursing profession. "Though we make up the bulk of the health care profession, only \$1 out of \$200 of the budget for the National Institutes of Health goes toward nursing research," Summers says. "If Congress knew what nurses really do, they'd increase that amount 20- or 40-fold and make a serious effort to resolve the nursing faculty shortage." —Jeanne Johnson

